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BOTSWANA

FIRST PERSON

Melon Farms Reopen Doors

An agricultural technician balances work and family



Photo: USAID/Roslyn Waters-Jensen

Itumeleng Ncube, Agricultural Technician at the Olebile Gabarone farm, helps a trial project grow melons and watermelons in the winter season.

"I am so happy to have this job and to finally be able to give my children a little bit extra. It was hard when we had to do everything with only my husband's salary," said Itumeleng Ncube, an agricultural technician and mother.

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Cynthia Ncube shows off a new school uniform to her girlfriends. At last, her mother no longer worries about how she can afford the ever-increasing school fees for her two oldest children. This is the first year that Itumeleng Ncube has had such peace of mind. For the first time in 12 years, Itumeleng is earning a regular income.

A trained agricultural technician, Itumeleng followed her husband from Zimbabwe to Botswana in 1993, after he was recruited for a job there. Itumeleng focused on raising her children after they moved, but she often dreamed of returning to work. That was more than a decade ago.

When she heard that USAID was launching a new project to explore the feasibility of commercial melon farming around the country's capital city, Gaborone, she knew this was her chance. USAID was collaborating with the Botswana Horticulture Council, the Ministry of Agriculture, and local farmers to see if they could produce melons during the winter season, a time when specialty melons are not produced elsewhere in the region. Since melon supplies are low during the winter, their value is greater. Itumeleng joined the project, finally putting her technical skills to use helping cultivate various kinds of melon. Fruit processors in South Africa, the main buyers for winter melons, have indicated their satisfaction with the quality of melons delivered as part of the trial.

Today, Itumeleng is not only an employee, but also an employer. Since she started working full-time, she hired a Motswana girl to look after her youngest daughter, 3-year-old Muzingaye, at home. Itumeleng, whose name means "to give thanks" in Setswana, the language of her grandparents, ascribes her newfound economic freedom entirely to the project.

Once the trial phase is over and commercial production starts, Itumeleng intends to continue working as a farm manager. She hopes to share the expertise gained from the trials with others, further expand her own skills, and keep balancing her professional work with her other job — raising her children.